
Defense Report

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Poor Living Conditions Overseas — A Detriment to Soldier Morale and Readiness

The commander in chief, U.S. Army Europe, calls the facilities in which many of his 220,000 soldiers and their families live and work "depressing, primitive conditions that fall far short of any reasonable standards." These deplorable conditions adversely affect the morale and effectiveness of the one-third of our active Army which constitutes the lion's share of the American commitment to the NATO alliance.

Most of these facilities are pre-World War II *Wehrmacht kasernes* occupied by the U.S. Army after that war. Until 1981, the United States was reluctant to invest in any long-range programs for renovation or new construction in the expectation that our military presence in Europe would soon diminish. As a result, the 65 percent of our soldiers who live in barracks in Europe had to exist under what a *Time* magazine report three years ago described as "conditions that could cause riots in U.S. prisons." Ninety percent of the trouble was from leaking roofs, water in building walls, and chronic problems with heat, water and sewer systems.

Army families were little, if any, better off. Even today, they may be forced to wait up to two years after arrival before they are provided government housing. As a result, 9,400 families eligible for family quarters live in substandard rental housing or are separated because they cannot find suitable accommodations.

Now that it is clear that the mutual security interests of the U.S. and its NATO allies require a continued commitment, corrective actions are underway. Funds appropriated by Congress since 1981 are paying dividends as some of the deteriorated facilities are renovated and modernized. Much more remains to be done: more funding is required for construction, repair and maintenance of barracks, housing and work buildings. The Army, the Department of Defense and Congress must continue to support these efforts fully if we are to provide our front-line soldiers in Europe the basic living and working conditions they deserve.